

James Damico with Ruthie Riddle

## Exploring Freedom and Leaving a Legacy: Enacting New Literacies with Digital Texts in the Elementary Classroom

*Fifth-graders explore complicated social issues and create a CD entitled Exploring Freedom.*

*"I get furious when I think about child slavery going on around the world." (Jason)*

*"We are wondering, did the cop kill him because he was black? . . . Was it because of skin color or because he had a criminal record? . . . We have found that more African American men have been shot in Cincinnati by White males [police officers]. . . . This research shows this seems to be a racial problem." (Dwayne & Darrin)*

*"I chose this poem because it is criticizing Native Americans, and I am Native American." (Crissy)*

Toward the end of the school year, Ruthie, as a first-year teacher, guided her fifth-graders as they investigated socially complex topics and issues, such as child slavery, racial profiling, and racial prejudice. The results of the students' investigations, which include the excerpts above, appear on a CD the students created. Titled *Exploring Freedom*, the CD is a multimedia product with digital video clips of the students performing their own skits, reading their essays and reports, as well as reading and reciting poetry. With an emphasis on the students enacting "new literacies" (Leu, 2000; New London Group, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), this article describes the social practices the students engaged in and range of topics they explored, and it considers the ways Ruthie facilitated these inquiries. Central to the storyline are the critical and collaborative qualities of this endeavor as the students engaged with and created digital texts for the CD with explicit intentions to "leave a legacy" to the students, teachers, and administrators at their elementary school.

### NEW LITERACY STUDIES

The new literacy studies represent a shift *away from* an autonomous model of literacy—a model that suggests literacy and academic reading and writ-

ing are sets of neutral, technical, and universal skills—*toward* an ideological model of literacy—which understands literacy to be sets of highly contextualized, culturally sensitive social practices (Street, 2003). This shift to an ideological model compels educators to recognize that there are multiple literacies, including personal, home, community, and school-based literacies, that vary across time and space (Hagood, 2000). This emphasis on multiple literacies integrates "print, visual, and audio texts of cultural and linguistic diversity and include[s] communicative skills of speaking, listening, writing, and reading" (Hagood, 2000, p. 313). Foregrounding the role of communicative skills and expanding our understanding of what counts as a text relates to "multimodal literacy" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Multimodal meaning-making is evident as teachers and students investigate subject matter through a range of texts—print-based (books, newspapers, magazines, etc.) and nonprint-based (images, video, audio, etc.)—and learn to communicate their own understandings and ideas using textual, visual, spatial, audio, and gestural modes.

With its emphasis on an ideological model, the new literacy studies also refers to definitions and enactments of literacies as always being embedded and contested in relations of power. This calls for explicit questioning of "whose literacies are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant" in any given context (Street, 2003, p. 1). Attention to issues of power (who benefits and who does not from particular conceptions and practices of literacy) highlights a link between new literacy studies and critical perspectives of literacy. Such perspectives understand literacy as a process of identifying and transforming unjust and inequitable social conditions (Freire & Macedo, 1987) where being literate requires "an ability to critically analyse, deconstruct, and reconstruct a range of texts and other representational forms . . . [as well as] the ability

to engage in the social responsibilities and interactions associated with these texts” (Anstey, 2002, p. 446). In this sense, engaging in multimodal literacy practices links to envisioning and enacting social change, where readers, teachers, and students alike see themselves as “active designers” or “makers of social futures” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 2000). As social designers, readers can examine “how texts work” (Luke & Freebody, 1997), unraveling the ideological trappings of texts and the ways in which authors and texts position themselves and position readers. Readers also create or produce a range of their own texts, including photography, drama, audio, video, and multimedia, to reflect and communicate their own critical insights. For example, Allen et al. (2002) show how young children used photography to cultivate home–school connections and explore cultural identities and differences. Sweeny (1999), in her work as a 4th-grade teacher, describes how her students used drama by writing, performing and producing a play about injustices in South Africa. With a focus on digital texts, Hull (2003) describes a process of “digital storytelling” where adolescents create multimedia compositions with photography, music, and video as a way to narrate personal experience and engage in social critique.

The creation of nonprint texts, as these examples highlight, aligns with the National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association *Standards for the English Language Arts* (1996), which stress the importance of K–12 students developing proficiencies as interpreters and creators of nonprint, visual texts.

*Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography, and more. Teaching students how to interpret and create visual texts such as illustrations, charts, graphs, electronic displays, photographs, film, and video is another essential component of the English language arts curriculum. Visual communication is part of the fabric of contemporary life. (p. 5, emphasis added)*

Interpreting, critiquing, and creating texts are also fundamental tenets of becoming active participants in a democracy. As Banks reminds us, “Students must not only be able to interrogate and recon-

struct knowledge, but must also be able to produce knowledge themselves if they are to be effective citizens in the multicultural world of the 21st century” (1995, p. 15). Amplifying this point, Lankshear, Peters, and Knobel (2000) argue that living in our increasingly technological, digitized, and multicultural world requires that we view and understand issues of knowledge production in terms of social practices where “knowing . . . reflect[s] a range of strategies for ‘assembling,’ ‘editing,’ ‘processing,’ ‘receiving,’ ‘sending,’ and ‘working on’ information and data to transform ‘data’ into ‘knowledge’” (p. 21). The creation of the *Exploring Freedom* CD represents the students and Ruthie immersed in these social practices of knowledge production.

## PLANNING THE INQUIRY PROJECTS

Ruthie’s classroom is situated in an ethnically and economically diverse mid-sized urban school district in the Midwestern United States. Of the 28 students in this 5th-grade class, 10 identified as African American, 10 as European American, 4 as Latina/o, and 4 as multiracial. Half the students participated in the free/reduced lunch program. Throughout the year, the two of us worked together to investigate what teaching for social justice could look like for Ruthie as a first-year teacher and for James as a former elementary/middle school teacher and novice teacher educator.

With a primary goal for students to pose and pursue their own questions, rather than rely exclusively on Ruthie for answers, we talked through the planning of a literature-based language arts unit with a content emphasis on freedom and slavery. Ruthie launched the unit in early February with a study of the biography, *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman* (Sterling, 1954), and the unit blossomed into a five-month intensive inquiry into issues of freedom and slavery, culminating with the creation of the *Exploring Freedom* CD in June (see Figure 1).

Along with the primary text, *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman*, the students and Ruthie read and responded to a range of other texts, including ten picture books, two movies, and several songs. In other writings, we have explored the social practices and different dimensions of the literacy learning in Ruthie’s classroom as this literature unit progressed: we have described how the

**Interpreting, critiquing,  
and creating texts are also  
fundamental tenets of becoming  
active participants in a  
democracy.**

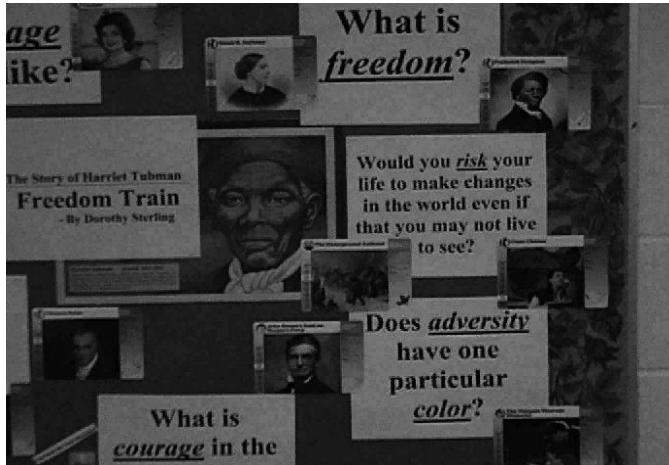


Figure 1. Ruthie and her students review history, characters, and concepts around the theme of "Freedom."

students cultivated their skills with asking and pursuing questions and sustaining dialogue (Damico & Riddle, 2004); how they developed a more comprehensive conception of reading, coming to see all texts as questionable and coming to see readers (especially themselves) as puzzle solvers, text and genre investigators, and potential authors (Damico, 2005b); and how they investigated issues of social justice through poetry (Damico, 2005a). This article focuses on literacy practices of the students as they created a CD to culminate their work during the literature unit.

In early April, as the students were completing their study of *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman* (Sterling, 1954) and the range of other texts, Ruthie wanted to create space and opportunities for the students to initiate and sustain their own inquiry-based final projects; she believed this would be an organic extension of the students' work with texts. During one of our many conversations, we discussed guidelines for the inquiry projects, and Ruthie ultimately settled on four guidelines with some accompanying questions and suggestions. She gave these to her students as a handout (see Figure 2).

By emphasizing "leaving a legacy" for future groups of students, teachers, administrators, and others in the school community, we hoped that students would see themselves as part of history by contributing to the intellectual and social development of the school and community into the distant future. During one planning session, Ruthie shared: "I want them to strengthen themselves and the community [and] understand that they play an important role in society now. I want them thinking about how they can make an impact on their world." For Ruthie,

## Exploring Freedom—Final Project Guidelines

### 1. Reviewing your learning

- What touched or intrigued you the most during this unit? Was there a certain part of *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman* that moved you? Or maybe another one of the books? Was it a song? Or maybe a movie?
- Think about WHY this particular aspect of the unit was so important to you.
- Now think about a way to build on this interest.

### 2. Choosing a topic

- Think about a way to explore your topic by connecting it to what is going on somewhere in the world today.
- What do you want to learn more about? (The only requirement is that your topic connects to issues of freedom, slavery, or another related topic.)

### 3. Representing your learning

- Create a way to represent your learning (essay, report, Web page, children's book, etc.)
- You may work with partners or in small groups for these projects if you wish. You can also work primarily on your own.

### 4. Leaving a legacy—taking action

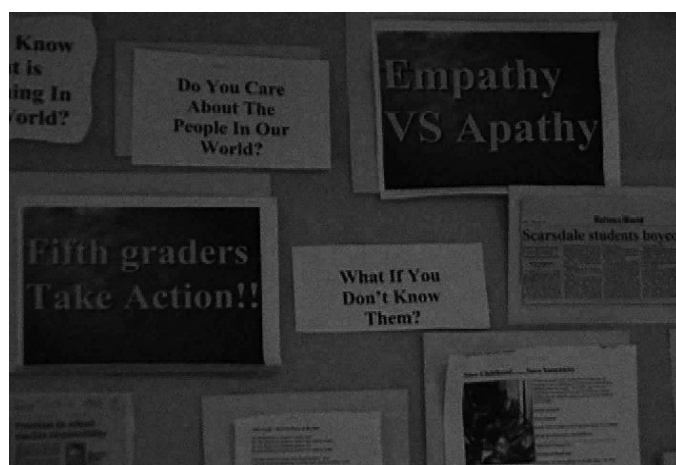
- This project is an opportunity to learn more about yourself and the world *and* to think about how you can make a contribution to the world.
- What legacy do you want to leave as a 5th grader in this school?

Figure 2. Inquiry project guidelines

ie, "making an impact" equated with "taking action" and "leaving a legacy" (see #4 in Figure 2).

Ruthie also created the final project guidelines with several corresponding goals in mind. First and foremost, Ruthie wanted students to pursue what she called their "passions" as they inquired into an issue or topic that was meaningful for them related to slavery/freedom. She wanted students to reflect on their experiences during the unit, consider some of the most powerful, intriguing, or confusing moments, and build upon these (see Figure 3). Second, Ruthie wanted students to wrestle with past to present connections. She believed that the students had already raised and begun pursuing many provocative questions about the relationship between slavery in 19th-century America and contemporary society. The inquiry projects would afford students opportunities for more self-directed learning, enabling them to both pull together and extend their learning. Up to this point in the unit, the children had learned to value each other's ideas in whole-group and small-group discussions. The inquiry projects would take





**Figure 3.** *Reflecting on the past, students react to their most powerful connections.*

the next step, inviting students to rely on each other even more as they investigated their topics and created ways to present their findings. One clear example of the students beginning to extend their learning in the unit and depend on each other for ideas occurred during one whole-class brainstorming session about the final projects. One student drew upon the example of James Byrd (an African American man in Jasper, Texas, who was dragged to his death from the back of a truck driven by several white males) to challenge the idea that life for African Americans in the United States is completely different today than it was in the past. This led to whole-class conversations about current events and ongoing social injustices, with a particular emphasis on racial profiling and child slavery. The students stressed the need to communicate the result of their investigations with others.

In order to deepen and enrich their experiences, Ruthie wanted students to choose the form of their final projects. The potential range and diversity of project ideas was soon evident during a whole-class brainstorming session when students expressed interest in multimodal sign systems, such as writing and performing plays, stories, and songs; choreographing a dance; and conducting survey research. As the students began to identify the form or genre as well as the content emphasis of their inquiry projects, Ruthie asked them how they wanted to share their work with others. This aligned with the goal for students to “leave a legacy” to the future students, teachers, and staff at their elementary school. Eventually a CD called *Exploring Freedom* was chosen as the best way to share and

preserve their work. It also bears mentioning that this goal to “leave a legacy” was intimately connected to the literature the students read during the language arts unit. As the students read and responded to books about Harriet Tubman and Ruby Bridges, Ruthie wanted her students to understand how they could also make a positive impact on the world, even as young children.

## ENACTING NEW LITERACIES TO INVESTIGATE SOCIAL INJUSTICES

The students began their projects in late April and completed them in early June. Throughout this time, their work embodied the fluid, dynamic, and social qualities of a new literacies approach. Students brainstormed project ideas as a whole class and configured and reconfigured their small groups as their inquiry topics evolved. For example, a large group of ten students working on a skit divided into three groups; a student switched her focus from child slavery to affirmative action; and a group revised their plan of writing and illustrating a children’s book to researching and writing an essay about child slavery. The social practices of the students and their joint problem solving were also nurtured in other ways. Ruthie facilitated whole-class “check-ins” where individual and small groups of students prepared progress reports on their efforts, sharing some of their successes and struggles. Ruthie also used the whole-class format to share and interrogate particular texts the students were using (and perhaps struggling with). For example, after a student brought in an article about child slavery that he found in the newspaper, Ruthie read the article and facilitated a discussion that focused on past to present connections and the continuity of social injustices in the world. Ruthie also used these discussions to highlight the importance of cultivating an inquiry stance by often asking questions like: “What are you wondering about as I read this article to you? What questions do you have? What information is not provided in this article? Whose perspective is represented here? What might be other perspectives on this issue? How might we obtain more information and multiple perspectives (e.g., from print resources, the Internet, interviews, movies, etc.)?” Significant social interactions also occurred more informally, as students moved about the room during small-group work time to share websites and other resources. When students found an interesting website on

their topic, they would talk with others about what they found as well as share how they found it (e.g., what keyword searches led them to the site). This was especially the case for groups of students with similar inquiry topics. There was, for example, much conversation and sharing about two websites with an emphasis on child labor: <http://www.humanrightswatch.org/children/labor.htm> and <http://www.us.ilo.org/teachin/ilokids/day>.

cfm (located on the International Labor Organization website).

From late April to early June, the students immersed themselves in their work: researching their topics, writing and revising their texts, and rehearsing their performances for the *Exploring Freedom* CD. All the projects grappled with social injustices (see first column in Table 1).

Topic	Genre	Setting	Description	Modes	Students
Slavery	Drama	Past–Present	Skit written and performed by students that shows some slaves escaping while others are caught and beaten.	textual visual spatial aural gestural	6
Censorship	Drama	Present	Skit written and performed by students that depicts children being censored by parents from watching certain television show.	textual visual spatial aural gestural	4
Censorship	Drama	Present	Skit written and performed by students that shows how a city-wide curfew is unfair to children and young adults.	textual visual spatial aural gestural	4
Racial profiling	News broadcast	Present	Description of how Timothy Thomas, an African American teenager, was killed by a White police officer in Cincinnati, Ohio.	textual visual spatial aural gestural	2
Child slavery	Essay	Present	Description of current cases of child slavery around the world.	textual visual spatial aural gestural	2
Child slavery	Editorial	Present	Argument that child slavery is morally wrong.	textual visual spatial aural gestural	1
Freedom	Dance	Past–Present	Performance of “Freedom dance” created by student.	visual spatial gestural	1
Freedom and slavery	Collage*	Past–Present	Assemblage of newspaper and magazine clippings dealing with slavery or freedom.	visual spatial	2
Slavery	Essay*	Past–Present	Emphasis on different depictions of slavery in a textbook, historical magazine, and children’s literature.	textual visual spatial	2
Affirmative action	Survey research*	Present	Study of adult beliefs (teachers and parents) of affirmative action (based on student-created survey).	textual	1
Child slavery	Survey research*	Present	Study of parent and student beliefs about child slavery (based on survey created by student).	textual	2

\* Indicates projects not included on the *Exploring Freedom* CD.

**Table 1.** Student projects use multiple modes to demonstrate learning.

One group of students (the first project listed in Table 1) examined historical and contemporary instances of slavery, writing and performing a skit in which some slaves escape while others are caught and beaten. After the skit, the students address their audience and ask rhetorically, “Aren’t you glad slavery is over?” They then describe how slavery still exists, citing facts they found on a government website. Students also addressed issues of child slavery by composing an editorial and several essays and/or conducting survey research; the results of the surveys revealed that many of the participants (adults in the school and parents/adult family members of students) were not fully aware of existing practices of child labor and slavery.

Other students grappled with contemporary race relations and censorship issues. With an emphasis on racial profiling, two students created a news broadcast to provide a “live report” of the racial tensions in Cincinnati, Ohio, after an unarmed African American teenager was killed by a white police officer. Affirmative action was the topic for another student as she created and conducted a survey with adults to discern their views about this volatile topic. Some students confronted censorship issues with skits (the second and third projects listed in Table 1). One skit focused on a student not being able to watch television while the other concerned curfews placed on children and how this might be unfair.

The students’ projects represent a critical multimodal literacy approach in action. The students investigated socially complex topics and injustices with and through a range of sign systems, which engaged them in new social practices as they created and worked to best represent their ideas. Through skits, a television news report, essays/editorial, a dance, a collage, and two research studies based on their own survey data, the students integrated textual, visual, spatial, audio, and gestural modes in their meaning-making work (fifth column in Table 1). For all the projects except the dance and collage, the students composed their own written texts. They also grappled with decisions about how to best communicate their ideas visually and spatially. Each group of students needed to make choices about where and what to film (or what to include in the collage) as well as about costumes and props. Their decisions aligned with their awareness that they would be creating perfor-

mances for the class CD. In performances the audio and gestural modes were most salient as the students rehearsed and recorded (and re-recorded) their performances until they were satisfied with the visual, aural, and gestural qualities of their work.

The students also addressed issues of power, including censorship (i.e., restrictions on television viewing and curfews for children), and they identified and investigated social injustices, including racial profiling and child slavery. A closer look at two of these projects—the news broadcast and the editorial—provides a more in-depth view of the students enacting new literacies with an explicit emphasis on social injustices.

### News Broadcast—Racial Profiling

Darrin and Dwayne, two African American boys, face the camera as they stand outside the school. Behind them there is a field and adjoining playground (see Figure 4). They begin their news broadcast by introducing themselves, “This is Darrin and my partner, Dwayne, and we are reporting live on the Cincinnati riots.” The voices and movement of students in the background lend additional legitimacy to the “on location” feel of this “live” report. Darrin and Dwayne report that violence and rioting has ensued in Cincinnati after Timothy Thomas, an African American teenager, was killed by a white police officer, Steven Roach. The two boys then offer additional facts that they have gleaned from newspapers and several websites. These facts include: “Timothy Thomas was killed by a single gun shot wound in an alleyway”;



**Figure 4.** Darrin and Dwayne choose a “live broadcast” setting for their report on racial profiling and violence.

“Thomas had a criminal record”; “Timothy Thomas is the fifteenth African American male killed by Cincinnati police since 1995, the fourth since November”; and “The FBI is beginning an investigation about whether there were any civil rights violations in Timothy Thomas’ death.” Darrin and Dwayne also describe the conflicting viewpoints about this shooting because, in their words, “the details of what happened remain sketchy.” The two boys point out that many people contend that Roach had no just cause for the shooting because Thomas was unarmed, while Roach defenders argue that the police officer’s life was in danger. Darrin and Dwayne conclude their report by asking a central question and drawing a conclusion:

*We are wondering, did the cop kill him because he was black? . . . Was it because of skin color or because he had a criminal record? Because of our research we have found that more African American men have been shot in Cincinnati by White males [police officers]. This research shows this seems to be a racial problem. And we think it’s up to the City Council to figure this out. This is ABC news reporting live on the Cincinnati riots. [This is] Darrin and Dwayne. Peace.*

### Editorial—Child Slavery

Jason stands in the hallway in front of a bulletin board that includes some of the students’ inquiry project work (see Figure 5). He begins his editorial with an unequivocal moral stance, stating, “I think that child slavery is demonic and I think it’s wrong.” He then goes on to offer some facts about child labor. “When I saw the Web page called ‘A day in the life of a child laborer’ (<http://www.us.ilo.org/teachin/ilokids/day.cfm>), it showed a

child who was a bricklayer who . . . had to get up at 2 a.m. and had to work fourteen hours.” Jason then suggests that organizing a march in Washington, D.C. “just like Dr. Martin Luther King did” would be one way to inform and persuade people to end child labor and slavery. In his conclusion, Jason expresses how he feels about what he has learned about child slavery, pumping his fist with the word *furious*:

*These children are being neglected and not being loved. . . . It makes me feel angry. I get furious when I think about child labor or child slavery. I think it’s wrong and it breaks my heart and it needs to stop today.*

These two examples show students immersed in critical multimodal literacy and new social practices as they create their digital texts. Darrin, Dwayne, and Jason first created print texts, composing the news report and the child slavery editorial (textual mode); then they worked with sound and video, using visual, spatial, audio, and gestural modes as they recorded their projects for the *Exploring Freedom* CD. The three boys were mindful of these literacy modes, demonstrating great care as they composed their texts and then rehearsed and recorded their work for the CD. Darrin and Dwayne elected to be outside the school with other students in the background (visual and spatial modes) to “make it look live like a real live report.” They also wanted to maintain what they called a “serious and calm” stance throughout their report (which lasted more than four minutes) so they could be “just like television news people.” The two boys also re-recorded their broadcast several times before they were satisfied with their performance (audio and gestural modes). It bears noting that they weren’t fully satisfied with the results, but time constraints compelled them to finish. Jason was similarly intentional with his performance for the CD. The background he selected was a bulletin board that focused on child slavery (visual and spatial modes), and he endeavored to perform his piece with expression (audio and gestural modes). This led him to pump his fist to emphasize that child slavery makes him “furious.”

Darrin, Dwayne, and Jason were also intentional about the topics they selected—child labor/slavery and the killing of Timothy Thomas. The boys found these topics emotionally upsetting and each expressed a desire to learn more about these social injustices. Like their classmates,

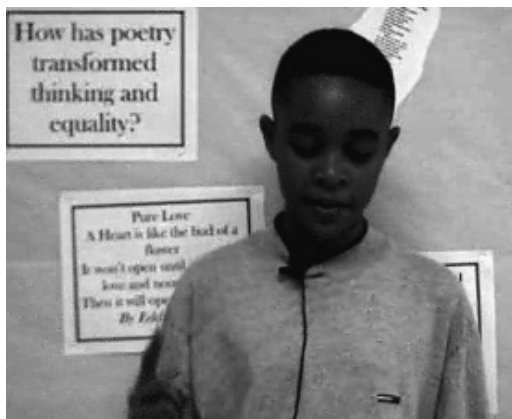


Figure 5. Jason uses student projects as a backdrop for his position statement on child slavery.



Darrin, Dwayne, and Jason also wanted to communicate their findings to teachers, parents, community members, and other classes in the school because, in Jason's words, "people need to know about this!"

New literacy studies help us understand that new forms of texts (e.g., sound, images, video, hypertext, etc.) can engender new forms of textual practice (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). The shift from working solely with print-based texts as readers and writers to creating and producing digital texts for the CD required students in Ruthie's classroom to think in more multimodal and integrative ways. After composing and revising their ideas in print form, they needed to further develop these texts aurally and visually and these revisions (e.g., choosing locations to film with appropriate backgrounds and levels of noise, striking the appropriate emotional tone with their performances, etc.) worked to clarify and amplify their main points. With their inquiry projects, Darrin, Dwayne, Jason, and their classmates help us understand how these textual practices can be enacted in the classroom as well as recognize how a teacher's inquiry and social justice stance can guide children to critically engage with significant social issues.

## PERFORMING POETRY—LINKING TO THE *EXPLORING FREEDOM* CD

As the inquiry project work continued, Ruthie and the students began a study of poetry. Because Ruthie wanted students to deepen the work they had begun with the literature-based unit that focused on freedom and slavery and that they

had extended with their inquiry projects, the students read, responded to, and performed a range of poems. Similar to the inquiry project work, the students enacted new literacies and immersed themselves in critical multimodal literacy (integrating textual, visual, spatial, audio, and gestural modes) and new social practices in their study, creation, preparation, and performances of poetry for the *Exploring Freedom* CD. They made choices about the content of the poems, which reflected a commitment to exploring social injustices, and they provided their own explanations of the poems after reading or reciting them. They also made decisions about ways to best communicate the poems' content (as well as their explanations) through the medium of audio-video digital clips for the CD. This included choices about whether they should read or recite the poem and choices specific to performing a poem (e.g., issues of pace, tone, and dynamics). Also similar to the inquiry projects, the students rehearsed, recorded, and re-recorded their poetry performances until they were satisfied with their work.

The students' work with poetry dealt explicitly with issues of power and social injustices, namely racial prejudice and discrimination (see Table 2), and represented how they explored the question, "What does it mean to be American?" (Damico, 2005a)—an inquiry topic that emerged as they began reading and responding to poems by authors like Langston Hughes (1996), Janet Wong (1994), and Sherman Alexie (1996). One student, Crissy, who identified as Native American and European American, for example, read and then critiqued a poem "The Buffalo" for its prejudice against Native Americans, saying, "I chose this poem because

Poem	Author	Description
"White"	Mary O'Neil	Student reads poem and then shares that he chose this poem to make the point that "No one is really this [white] color."
"Dreams"	Langston Hughes	Student recites poem.
"The Buffalo"	(unknown)	This early 20th-century poem describes Native Americans as being "far from courtesy." Student recites poem and then adds, "I chose this poem because it is criticizing Native Americans, and I am Native American."
"Speak Up"	Janet Wong	Two students read the poem, which has two voices or characters: a Korean American and a European American. Poem raises questions about who is American.
"Freedom"	Students	Two students read their poem written for two voices about the need for freedom.
"Freedom"	Student	Student reads poem about the hope for more freedom in the world.
"Mother to Son"	Langston Hughes	Ruthie recites poem, then adds that the poem has had a great impact on her life, helping her through difficult times to become who she is today.

**Table 2.** Students use poetry to explore issues of racism and discrimination.



it is criticizing Native Americans, and I am Native American.” Another student questioned the terms “White” and “Black” as categories of racial identity when he read the poem “White” (O’Neill, 1972) and explained how “No one is really White.” After this student raised this issue, the students decided that the two terms “White” and “Black” are linguistically limited (and limiting) and elected instead to use the terms African American and European American to better situate and understand racial identities historically.

## SEVERAL PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES

Up to this point, this article has offered a seemingly rosy, problem-free account of a group of inquisitive and able students with a talented teacher engaged deeply in new literacies to expose and explore social injustices and creating digital texts to produce a class CD. This is not an inaccurate depiction of events, but, like all classroom spaces, the students and Ruthie did not sail through this experience without challenges.

Facilitating inquiry-based projects and creating digital texts to be recorded on a CD posed a range of challenges for Ruthie as a first-year teacher. These challenges included: guiding different facets of the research process, assessing students’ contributions, and finding instructional time in the day to guide the children’s inquiry-based work.

## Guiding the Research Process

Students needed guidance as they selected and pursued diverse topics of inquiry and genres to communicate their findings. For example, as students researched websites (there were four Internet-ready computers in the classroom) and wrote reports or essays, Ruthie needed to assist them with analyzing and interpreting vast amounts of information. Some of the students struggled with finding relevant websites and reading difficult text found there. Another challenge entailed helping students conduct empirical research. For example, before one student could conduct interviews with teachers and parents about their views of affirmative action, Ruthie needed to help this student understand some key ideas about affirmative action—What is it? When and how has it developed?—as well as support her to create interview questions, conduct the interviews, and interpret/analyze the results.

**Like all classroom spaces, the students and Ruthie did not sail through this experience without challenges.**

A related challenge surfaced when two students wanted to do a textual analysis of several textbook accounts of slavery along with several magazines and newspaper articles about child slavery. This required that Ruthie help students find and select the resources, choose which were most appropriate to analyze, and devise a way to do the analysis and present the findings. Ruthie also had to find ways to support students who wanted to write, direct, and perform short plays or skits about connections between slavery and their own lives; this involved helping her negotiate group and individual roles and responsibilities for each step in this creative process as well as provide feedback on their writing and performances.

## Assessing Student Work

Another persistent challenge was assessment of students’ work. When the students decided to create a CD (where they would perform and discuss their individual or small-group inquiry to make their learning public), Ruthie wondered how to effectively gauge student involvement and learning in terms of what amount of writing she should require, how to use different assessment criteria across various projects (e.g., essays and skits), and how both individuals and small groups could be accountable for their learning. Ruthie eventually devised ways to address these assessment challenges, employing informal assessment strategies (e.g., checklists and note-taking) as well as formal strategies (e.g., grades for completed projects). Yet, she remained concerned about whether she was adequately gauging some students’ work.

## Dealing with Scheduling Constraints

Cutting across these challenges were scheduling and time constraints. In general, inquiry-based approaches require significant blocks of time as students pose and pursue meaningful questions and worthwhile topics (Harste, 2001), and this was clearly the case for this class. And similar to many other classrooms, the students also lost valuable work time on their final projects due to standardized tests. During April and May, students completed two rounds of standardized tests. The first was a national test that was administered over four days and the second were quarterly district-wide tests in both reading and math.

All these challenges point to complicated questions that we wrestle with as inquiry educators. What does it mean to help students engage deeply in their topics? What does it look like to scaffold their reading of complicated texts, especially Web-based texts? How flexible do teachers need to be as students switch their inquiry focus? Reconsidering these questions now, several years later, we recognize that although all inquiry-minded teachers must grapple with these and other questions, the challenges can be especially vexing for beginning teachers. Fortunately, we were able to explore these questions together and learned a great deal about the capabilities and gifts of young children and the importance of setting high academic, intellectual, and social standards in the classroom. And for the past several years, we have extended our learning as Ruthie continues to cultivate her skills as an inquiry educator. For example, during small-group inquiry projects, she now individualizes instruction more, setting clear goals and expectations with each student, and she uses a range of rubrics to assess and guide them in their investigations. She also has been refining an inquiry approach across the curriculum.

## LEAVING A LEGACY

As enactors of new literacies, Ruthie's students engaged in social practices of knowledge construction as they processed, assembled, edited, and worked on information "to transform 'data' into 'knowledge'" (Lankshear, Peters, & Knobel, 2000, p. 21). This knowledge production process resulted in the creation of a multimedia CD as the students stitched together their work to create a coherent product. (See Figure 6 for a screen shot of the CD template). Engaging in the social practices of posing and pursuing investigative questions, analyzing and evaluating a variety of information sources (e.g., books, picture books, newspapers, and multimedia websites), and creating, performing and filming digital texts (e.g., skits, a dance, research reports and essays, and poetry) enabled the students to develop understandings of complex topics, such as child slavery, racial profiling and race-based riots, affirmative action, and discrimination across ethnic groups. All these projects required careful, critical reading and different forms of writing, speaking, and dramatic performance. Ruthie's inquiry approach also required a flexible, open learning environment with sufficient curricular and instructional space for students to mean-

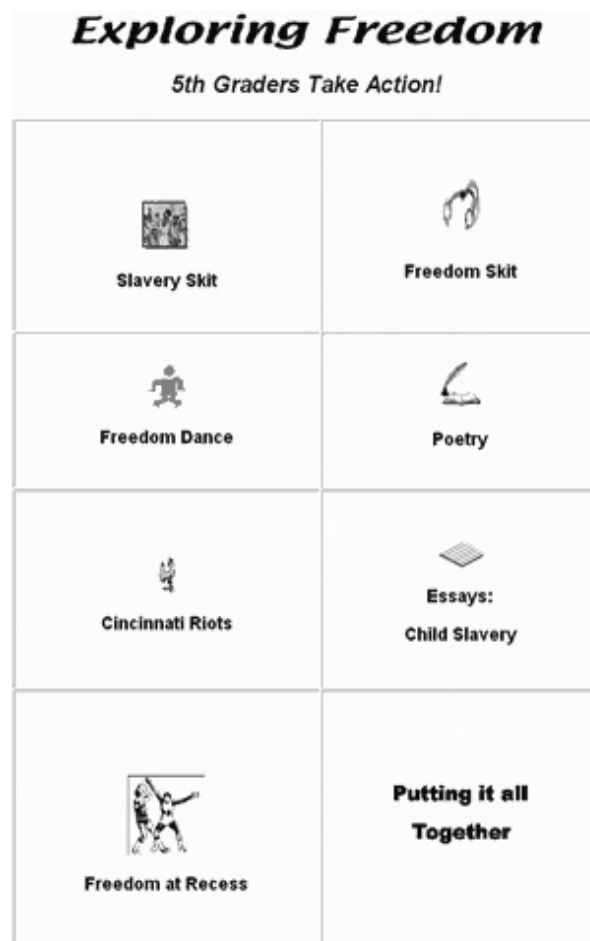


Figure 6. Students used this template to organize their projects for the final CD.

ingfully collaborate and learn with and from each other and Ruthie. Similar experiences are less likely to occur in more restrictive and reductive learning contexts where curricular and instructional decisions are principally governed by regimes of scripted programs, lock-step curricula, and standardized testing. These students benefited from the professional expertise of a teacher who lives and works with children and knows her students' talents and needs in more holistic, comprehensive, and sophisticated ways.

As the students worked toward the creation of the *Exploring Freedom* CD with their inquiry projects and poetry study, Ruthie consistently reiterated the importance of students "leaving a legacy." One morning, for example, as the students were rehearsing their performances, Ruthie said, "I want them to know that they can make a difference in the lives of others now. They don't have to wait until they get older." For Ruthie, creating the CD would enable students to leave a legacy to the school—a legacy of their creative, collaborative,

and critical work—thus informing viewers of contemporary social problems like child slavery and racial profiling. While the students began with an audience of teachers, school administrators, and future students in mind, the scope of the intended audience for the CD soon broadened when one student's survey results showed that many of her respondents (adults in the community) knew little about the extent of child slavery around the world. This instilled in the students a sense of urgency; they wanted their viewers to take action. The essays and editorial, for example, argued explicitly for the need for everyone to be involved in ameliorating or eliminating these problems. Even during the last hours of the school year, the students and Ruthie delayed their end-of-year pizza party to finish crafting a letter to President Bush calling for him to help end the injustice of child slavery.

Envisioning ways to leave a legacy led to the creation of *Exploring Freedom*, a multimedia product that offers a vivid example of students as “active designers,” or “makers of social futures” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 2000), where, in this case, schools and classrooms can use new literacies to cultivate, document, and preserve critical, collaborative, and creative work into complicated social issues and toward transforming injustices.

**Authors' Note:** We acknowledge Ken Dirkin for helping produce the *Exploring Freedom* CD as well as the Language Arts reviewers and editors for their help in crafting this article.

## References

- Alexie, S. (1996). *The summer of black widows*. Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose.
- Allen, J., Fabregas, V., Hankins, K. H., Hull, G., Labbo, L., Lawson, H. S., et al. (2002). PhOLKS Lore: Learning from photographers, families, and children. *Language Arts*, 79(4), 312–322.
- Anstey, M. (2002). “It’s not all black and white:” Postmodern picture books and new literacies. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45(6), 444–457.
- Banks, J. A. (1995). The historical reconstruction of knowledge about race: Implications for transformative teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 24(2), 15–25.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (Eds.). (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London: Routledge.
- Damico, J. S. (2005a). Evoking hearts and heads: Exploring issues of social justice through poetry. *Language Arts*, 83(2), 138–148.
- Damico, J. S. (2005b). Multiple dimensions of literacy and conceptions of readers: Toward a more expansive view of accountability. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(7), 644–652.
- Damico, J. S., & Riddle, R. (2004). From answers to questions: A beginning teacher learns to teach for social justice. *Language Arts*, 82(1), 36–46.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Reading the word and the world*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Hagood, M. C. (2000). New times, new millennium, new literacies. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 39(4), 311–328.
- Harste, J. (2001). What education as inquiry is and isn’t. In S. Boran & B. Comber (Eds.), *Critiquing whole language and classroom inquiry* (pp. 1–17). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Hughes, L. (1996). *The dreamkeeper and other poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hull, G. A. (2003). Youth culture and digital media: New literacies for new times. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 38(2), 229–233.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). *New literacies: Changing knowledge and classroom learning*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Lankshear, C., Peters, M., & Knobel, M. (2000). Information, knowledge and learning: Some issues facing epistemology and education in a digital age. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 34(1), 17–39.
- Leu, D. J., Jr. (2000). Our children’s future: Changing the focus of literacy and literacy instruction. *Reading Teacher*, 53(5), 424–429.
- Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1997). The social practices of reading. In S. Muspratt, A. Luke, & P. Freebody (Eds.), *Constructing critical literacies: Teaching and learning textual practice* (pp. 185–226). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association. (1996). *Standards for the English language arts*. Urbana, IL, & Newark, DE: Authors.
- New London Group. (2000). A pedagogy of multiliteracies. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London: Routledge.
- O’Neill, M. (1972). *Hailstones and halibut bones*. New York: Bantam Doubleday.
- Sterling, D. (1954). *Freedom train: The story of Harriet Tubman*. New York: Scholastic.
- Street, B. (2003). What’s “new” in new literacy studies? Critical approaches to literacy and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 5(2), 1–14.
- Sweeney, M. (1999). Critical literacy in a fourth-grade classroom. In C. Edelsky (Ed.), *Making justice our project: Teachers working toward critical whole language practice* (pp. 96–114). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Wong, J. (1994). *Good luck gold and other poems*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

**James Damico** is assistant professor in language education at Indiana University, Bloomington. **Ruthie L. Riddle** teaches in the Lansing, Michigan, school district.